

MEMORANDUM

~~SECRET~~ -- XGDS(2) NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

26 January 1978

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PHH.

1639
INFORMATION

MEMORANDUM FOR:

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI

FROM:

PAUL B. HENZE

SUBJECT:

Djibouti and Some Longer Thoughts
on a Horn Settlement

It is a pity that in recent decades we have deprived ourselves of much of the flexibility that used to be possible in international affairs by elevating borders, sovereignty, UN membership and related considerations to the level of inviolable sacred principles. The territorial horse-trading in which Europeans used to engage so freely in the 17th and 18th centuries, both in Europe and in outlying parts of the world, and which they continued in Africa into the early 20th century, is thought to be no longer feasible. It is certainly difficult to contemplate. Each piece of territory that gains independence is treated as if it really possessed all the attributes of nationhood that characterize well established states. We lock ourselves into a stance of preserving, protecting, almost worshipping the sovereignty of dubiously viable entities and deprive ourselves of opportunities for creative solutions to problems that are likely to go on festering endlessly. Djibouti is a good case in point.

As a nation-state, Djibouti makes no sense. It has no physical resources. It is inhabited, sparsely, by two traditionally antagonistic tribes. The Afars are always going to lean toward Ethiopia, because that is where most Afars live. The Issas--Somalis--of Djibouti are always going to be drawn toward Somalia. Djibouti is of importance to Somalia only sentimentally; its economic importance to Ethiopia is great. There is little rationale for a city at this location at all except as a port serving the Ethiopian highlands.

Seven months of "independence" have seen Djibouti wither economically because of the cutting of the railway to Addis Ababa. The precarious Afar-Issa coalition government has fallen apart and prospects for a viable government commanding the loyalty of a majority of the population are much dimmer now than they seemed last June. We hear that Mogadiscio has allocated

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Z. Brzezinski

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millions of dollars for covert subsidies to Issa politicians in Djibouti and that they are buying up property from French and Arabs. The Afars, on the other hand, in spite of distaste for Mengistu's government, are gravitating back to what has always been their normal stance: a strong tilt toward Ethiopia, which they see as their only practical protecting force. The city and the outlying areas are plagued by terrorism. Refugees from the fighting in Ethiopia add to the strains and confusion among the largely unemployed local population. If France were not still garrisoning the territory, the Republic of Djibouti would probably already have lost what meager attributes of statehood it possesses.

It seems unwise for the United States to preoccupy itself with preserving the territorial integrity and "national existence" of Djibouti or to waste much in the way of resources trying to prop up this dubious state.

As the current Ethiopian-Somali struggle plays itself out, the outlook for Djibouti will become more and more hopeless. Somali covert political activity in Djibouti is polarizing and exacerbating tensions that were almost bound to become overwhelming in any case. The level of violence in Djibouti would not have to increase much for the French Government to find itself under irresistible domestic pressure to pull out its troops, technicians and teachers (many of the latter two are already leaving).

When the Ethiopians regain control of the railway, they will want to make maximum use of Djibouti's port. The Somalis will no doubt try to interfere--covertly or otherwise. The Ethiopians will easily be provoked into backing an Afar take-over. Large numbers of Somalis may end up having to flee Djibouti. Here, as in the Ogaden, the ultimate outcome of Somali irredentism could be irreparable injury to the very people they have been trying to reclaim and permanent defeat of their ambitions.

So why not try to rescue something positive from a situation that has many elements of disaster?

In an earlier era, in this kind of situation, a trade-off would have been the natural solution to consider: e.g., let Ethiopia incorporate Djibouti; in return let Ethiopia compensate Somalia by ceding much of the eastern triangle of the Ogaden. Djibouti is of enormous economic importance to Ethiopia and, as part of Ethiopia, the territory can achieve a modest level of prosperity. Djibouti would always be a burden on Somalia and has to live on someone's charity if it continues independent. The Ogaden is of little economic significance to Ethiopia; as grazing land it is of greater importance to Somalia. A fair trade would be twice or three times as much territory in the Ogaden in return for Djibouti.

An outcome such as this flies in the face of now sacred notions of sovereignty, UN status, etc. Still it could be a much more creative and mutually beneficial outcome and offer a better basis for a constructive relationship between Ethiopia and Somalia in the future than rigid and artificial adherence to borders as they presently exist.

At this stage the United States could not publicly advocate this kind of solution without generating denunciation and allegations of interference from both Ethiopians and Somalis, as well as most other Africans. In a sense, of course, this solution would violate the principle of territorial integrity which Africans back so strongly. But general adherence to the principle has never precluded mutually agreed territorial adjustments. The arrangement could be legally rationalized if the political will to implement it could be created. It could even, perhaps, be dressed up as an OAU solution.

An even more important obstacle to achievement of it at the present time would probably be Soviet opposition. The Soviets are likely to see gain in rigid advocacy of the principle of Djibouti's statehood and inviolability of all borders--while condoning and abetting violation of the principle in practice. They would no doubt like to establish themselves in Djibouti under an Ethiopian satellite regime that would be responsive to their bidding. Djibouti is a more more attractive base for them than Berbera, Assab or Massawa.

The solution I propose could probably be implemented only between an Ethiopian Government which had gone a fair way toward freeing itself from Soviet/Cuban tutelage, working with the help of friendly intermediaries, and a realistic post-Siad Somali successor government.

RECOMMENDATION

For the time being there is little we can do except to think ahead and avoid getting ourselves locked into a position of defending the existence of the Republic of Djibouti in face of practical collapse. At an appropriate time (not quite yet) we should talk to the French about this.